



news from the

Department of Community and Human Services

July 2013

Volume 15, Issue 3

Boards & Commissions

The following boards and commissions provide oversight and guidance to programs of the Department:

Alexandria Community Policy Management Team

Alexandria Community Services Board

Children, Youth & Families Collaborative Commission

Commission on Aging

Commission on Employment

Commission for Women

Economic Opportunities Commission

Social Services Advisory Board

Workforce Investment Board

*A Caring
Community
Promoting Respect,
Recovery, Hope*

Protecting Elderly Can Be Rewarding, Hazardous

Social workers Wilma Roberts and SueEllen Mawhinney were sent to the home of an older woman with health problems. "We were talking with her family and I noticed she had labored breathing," said Roberts.

"Everyone said they were going to take her to the doctor tomorrow but she had said, 'No'." Finally, Roberts called 911 and the woman was taken to the hospital. Doctors said if she hadn't gotten oxygen that day, she would have died.

Roberts and Mawhinney shake their heads. It's not the first time these social workers with Adult Protective Services (APS) have been sent to a home to check on an older person with health problems only to discover that relatives or neighbors have been either looking in on or living with the elder but would not take action because the person does not like to go to the doctor or the hospital.

If their job were as easy as checking on a person and calling 911, they would be happy. In fact, their assignments can go in many different directions. Adult Protective Services investigates reports of abuse, neglect, and exploitation of adults age 60 or older and incapacitated adults age 18 or older. When responding to a call, APS social workers may encounter hoarding, insect infestations, financial exploitation or substance abuse. Their health and safety may be jeopardized by contact with contagious diseases, verbal abuse, physical violence, sexual harassment, aggressive animals and weapons.

Based on the report and their knowledge of the situation, they may request assistance from mental health staff, police, EMS, Code Administration or the fire marshal. However, they are the first to walk in the door.

The most prevalent problem is self-neglect — not taking medication, not going to the doctor, not bathing, not eating, not paying bills or taking

care of their home, or giving money away. The other major problem is financial exploitation.

Roberts recounted the story of a retired professional who lost almost everything because he trusted con men who convinced him they could help him win the lottery. He gave them money and access to his bank accounts.

"We had to call family members who were out of state to come and obtain guardianship" said Roberts. "He moved into a facility because he lost his house to foreclosure. He didn't understand that people were taking advantage of him because he had vascular dementia."

"When we go out on a case, we're really assessing the individual's capacity to make decisions," Mawhinney explained. "We look for dementia or other brain

disorders that might impair a person's ability to make decisions and understand consequences."

APS social workers have 45 days to determine if a person is able to live independently or needs services. APS is part of the Office of Aging and Adult Services which may provide assistance such as home-based care, transportation, adult day services, adult foster care, nutrition services and legal intervention. Services may also be arranged for individuals who lack the capacity to consent in emergency situations.

"Some people do have the capacity to make decisions," noted Roberts, "but they self-neglect so badly that there's a safety issue and the judge will allow us to help them even though they refuse."

"Then there are folks who make poor decisions or need services, but they refuse. If they have the capacity to make decisions, we have to accept their choices," said Mawhinney. "We try to ensure that they're safe and we give them all the resources they need to assist themselves."



*SueEllen Mawhinney (left)
and Wilma Roberts*

Children's Mental Health Highlighted in May Events

Ten percent of children and adolescents in the United States experience serious emotional and mental disorders that cause significant functional impairment in their daily lives at home, in school and with peers, according to a U.S. Surgeon General report. However, many of these children and teens never receive the treatment that would enable them to function better and have a happier life.

To address these issues at a local level, the Department of Community and Human Services (DCHS) hosted several events during May, National Children's Mental Health Month, focused on City and state efforts to assist persons living with mental illness and to create awareness of the problem.

Del. Rob Krupicka co-hosted a Mental Health Forum that focused on children's mental health. Noting that three-fourths of mental illnesses appear by the age of 24, Krupicka cited data that show less than half of children with diagnosable mental health problems receive treatment. During the past legislative session, Krupicka sponsored a bill to get \$2.5 million in funding for Mental Health First Aid training for teachers, clergy, health professionals and others who work with children. After budget negotiations, the state awarded \$600,000 in Mental Health First Aid funding to go to localities throughout Virginia and \$500,000 for multi-state suicide prevention planning.

Youth Mental Health First Aid (YMHFA) is an 8-hour interactive course for persons who interact with youth in various capacities. The course teaches the risk factors, warning signs, and symptoms of mental health disorders in youth and how to respond appropriately. (Visit alexandriava.gov/DCHS in mid-August for upcoming trainings.)

In another event aimed at children's mental health, Giordana De Altin Popiolek, a clinical psychologist with DCHS, discussed the impact of violence on children, whether they see it on the news, in the neighborhood or in the home. Many of the children and youth that Popiolek sees in her work have an



Mike Mackey, above left, explains the Out of School Time program to Arlandria residents at the Children's Mental Health Awareness Day Fun Fair. At left, Tricia Bassing, Chief of Child Behavioral Health and Youth Development, with Dina Medina, fourth grader at Barrett Elementary School. Bassing is Dina's mentor.



Dr. Giordana De Altin Popiolek, above, and Mike Gilmore, in photo at right, with Del. Rob Krupicka.



intimate knowledge of violence. Some are the victims of violence. Parents, caregivers and other adults who are involved in a child's life are urged to look for behavior changes in children who have experienced trauma. Children can withdraw, become hyper-vigilant, act out, or exhibit odd behavior. If an adult suspects that a child is suffering from mental trauma, the adult should listen to the child, accept their feelings, and help them cope with the reality of their experience. The more profound the reaction, the more help the child may need, including professional counseling.

One of the keys to good mental health at any age is resiliency, the ability to adapt well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy or stress. Resiliency allows people to "bounce back" after experiencing relationship or workplace or financial difficulties. Fortunately, resiliency is not a trait; it is thoughts, actions and behaviors that can be learned. If children are fearful because of what they see in the news, Popiolek recommended limiting the amount of exposure to the coverage of the event such as the Newtown shooting. She also suggested talking to children about

possibility and probability. While it is possible that a gunman could come in their school, it is not highly probable.

The third children's mental health event was a Fun Fair in celebration of National Children's Mental Health Awareness Day. The event was cosponsored by DCHS, Tenants and Workers United and the Center for Alexandria's Children. Children enjoyed clowns, arts and crafts, prizes and games, while their parents learned how to promote their resiliency from birth to adulthood. Local organizations provided information to raise awareness about the importance of children's mental health and to emphasize that positive mental health is essential to a child's healthy development from birth.

Facts About Mental Illness

- About 6 percent, or 1 in 17 Americans live with a serious mental illness. One in four adults (approximately 58 million) experience a mental health disorder in a given year.
- Three-quarters of mental illnesses appear by the age of 24, yet less than half of children with diagnosable mental health problems receive treatment.
- Ten percent of children and adolescents in the U.S. have serious emotional and mental disorders that cause significant functional impairment in their daily lives at home, in school and with peers.
- One half of all lifetime cases of mental illness begins by age 14. Over 50 percent of students with a mental disorder ages 14 and older drop out of high school.
- Seventy percent of youth in the juvenile justice systems have at least one mental disorder with at least 20 percent experiencing significant functional impairment from a serious mental illness.
- The best treatments for serious mental illnesses today are highly effective; between 70- 90% of individuals have significant reduction of symptoms and improved quality of life with a combination of pharmacological and psychosocial treatments and supports.

Art Uniting People

"We tell ourselves stories in order to live," essayist Joan Didion wrote in the title essay of her collection "The White Album." The narratives serve to explain events or give some meaning to random actions or share with others who we are and what we experience. Story-telling, through the written word, drawing or drama, dance or music allows people to share their lives, and by doing so connect with others.

A number of persons living with mental illness shared their experiences through art work that was displayed at the third "Art Uniting People — A Celebration of Creativity and Mental Health" exhibit sponsored by DCHS, the Mental Health Anti-stigma Task Force and Friends of the Alexandria Mental Health Center.

This event and exhibit seeks to engage the Alexandria community in a conversation about the uniqueness and commonality of everyone. It is also designed to raise awareness about the stigma faced by those with mental illness, substance use disorders and intellectual disorders.



"Day and Night" by EMC.



Dancer Diana Freeman with drummers Joseph Ngwa and Yrone Sanders.

To help bring people together, storyteller Auntie Oye, master drummer Joseph Ngwa, drummer Yrone Sanders and dancer Diana Freeman, performed stories for the audience and then brought them into the performance.

Vera Oye, founder and director of the Palaver Hut Inc., learned the art of storytelling in her African culture. "Storytelling is a participatory experience between the teller and the listeners," she explains. "I lost my community in Liberia to political strife and immigrated to escape the horrors of civil war in 1990. The creative power of storytelling and dance allowed me to share my culture and heritage with the residents of Washington, D.C."

Oye, who believes in the power of storytelling to bridge cultures and transform individuals, says she "helps to motivate and empower individuals to perform and share their stories."



Members of the audience join in the dance.

Father's Day Celebrated Old West Style

The Adult Day Services Center invited seniors from the Charles Houston Senior Center and the St. Martin De Porres Senior Center to celebrate Father's Day Western style. Guests wore cowboy hats. Those who had them wore their boots and everyone wore a big smile when the members of the Boomerangs Square Dance Teaching Council joined the party to teach everyone to do-si-do. For more information about Aging and Adult Services, visit alexandriava.gov/dchs.



Visit us at alexandriava.gov/dchs

To make comments or suggestions for story ideas, or to receive this newsletter by email, contact Jennifer Cohen at 703.746.3484 or jennifer.cohen@alexandriava.gov.



Access the City of Alexandria's pages on Twitter and Facebook. Connect today at alexandriava.gov/Twitter and alexandriava.gov/Facebook to receive up-to-the minute information about City news, events, initiatives and more.



Department of Community & Human Services
2525 Mount Vernon Avenue
Alexandria, VA 22314